Chapter 2

Education and the Crunch: Gloom and Opportunities

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Introduction

Now that we are all, as Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson put it in 2007, “Waking up to the incredible economic, political and social illusions of the Blair era”, what would be distinctive about a Marxist assessment of the period for education and training in England? Possibly three things: firstly, an examination of the role of the state, seen as changing from one capitalist state form to another, as clearly exemplified in education and training. Second, particular attention is paid to social class, which we see as also in a process of transformation, a transformation to which schools, colleges, and universities have contributed. Lastly, there is an emphasis on the totality of the area under review—the whole of institutionalised education from infant to postgraduate schools, and including training on and off the job and in and out of employment. This contrasts with the typically empirical academic approach, which tends to subdivide and specialise so that different sectors of education (primary, secondary, etc.) and their particular “problems” are treated from different disciplinary perspectives (of psychology, sociology, etc.) separately from others.

This is not to say that these three aspects or perspectives on education and training are definitive of a Marxist approach. As Mao Tse-Tung once said, “Marxism contains thousands of truths,” and other Marxist accounts in this collection point to the ultimate determination of educational developments by the economic, for instance, or to the role of education in reproducing labour power. Or they describe the effects of the now discredited neo-liberalism that the French always called Anglo-American hypercapitalism, or the “new
public management” of educational institutions and the consequent alienation and fetishisation experienced by staff and students. All of these, and other perspectives that might inform a Marxist standpoint, are important and contribute to the overall totality: “the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts” that Lukacs (1923) argued was “the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and transformed into the foundation of a new science.” “Totality,” “essence,” and the lately derided “binaries” (or Marxists might say dialectical oppositions generating irreconcilable contradictions) are all terms that this collection and others can now reassert against the previously pervasive postmodern “discourse” associated with neoliberalism.

The chapter grasps New Labour (NL) education policy as a whole, because it was New Labour governments that sought, much more systematically than had been attempted before, to integrate the reproduction of knowledge in education and training institutions with the economy. This was undertaken alongside social policies that contributed to what the OECD and the World Bank called “active labour market policies,” as opposed to the provision of “passive” welfare benefits. As education for “employability” was thus substituted for employment, education at all levels came to play a larger part in social control, especially of young people (see Mizen 2004). Responding to globalisation by “raising standards” or, rather, raising the level of qualifications for the majority, has not affected the position of the privileged minority. As an extended education no longer guarantees what it used to, the reality has, as this chapter will emphasise, seen New Labour implementing a policy of “education and training without jobs” (compare Finn 1987).

**The Changing State of Education**

Of course, New Labour inherited and developed the new post-welfare state (Tomlinson 2006) from the Tories. It had been imposed by the Thatcher governments and was marked for education and training by the 1988 Education Act, together with the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. So, in a sense, it did not matter which of the two main parliamentary parties won the 1997 election. Indeed, on election night, the Adam Smith Institute held a “Victory for the Free Market” celebration without radio or TV to report the results. Similarly, the last edition of the U.S. magazine *Newsweek* before the election (28/4/97) featured a cover picture of Baroness Thatcher with the title “The Real Winner.”